

Questions *and* Cannons

By Ltjg. Kristopher J. Nastro

Gun day is certainly a pinnacle moment in the Rhino FRS syllabus for a rookie replacement pilot. Following an evening of strafe planning, I was ready to head out to the NAS Fallon ranges to go “hammer down” for the first time on the 20 mm Vulcan cannon.

Following a detailed brief by the lead, I was given an opportunity to pose any questions I had about the upcoming flight.

Standard practice for the FA-18F, at that time, was to secure the 10 gear pins in a heavy-duty canvas and velcro bag inside door 6L (the access and inspection door for the cannon). Having inspected this bag and door on every preceding flight, it occurred to me the bag might not be stored in that location on events when the gun was to be used. I took advantage of my position as an inexperienced student and asked the question.

I was assured that keeping the bag in its place was standard practice, and I should expect it on my preflight. With all my questions answered, the IWSO (instructor weapons-system officer) and I walked for the flight and conducted a thorough preflight. Everything seemed in the right place, secure as it should be. (Note: This is where your “hindsight seeker head” should be giving you a screaming tone.)

The transit to the area went as briefed. We checked in with the T-34C low safe, callsign “Dawg,” and broke

off into the strafe pattern. After more than a few “Abort” calls from Dawg, because of my lousy pattern parameters, I finally was given the coveted “cleared hot” call. I armed up and continued my 15-degree dive toward my solution.

Hammer down. The jet shook with a tremendous fury as I delivered rounds down range. I had about a tenth of a second to think about just how awesome that was before I executed the safe-escape maneuver. I broke left, back into the pattern, for another pass. Although completely missing the target center point, I managed to expend roughly 50 rounds on that pass.

Pass two was crisper, and I again was given the “cleared hot” call from Dawg. I felt a bit more comfortable this time and tried to fly to a more precise solution. I went hammer down for the second time, only to feel that now familiar shake for a mere split second, followed by what felt





Master arm went to safe, and SIM (simulation) was boxed as we sorted through the confusion. We noted that only a handful of rounds were expended on that pass, and we suspected a gun jam. The decision was made to RTB.

Talking with the IWSO, lead, and base on the way home, we concluded we would roll to the end of the runway on landing, de-arm, and taxi back to the CALA (combat-aircraft-loading area).

Landing and de-arming were uneventful, and we shut down in the CALA. The IWSO beat me out of the cockpit and down the ladder, and headed right for door 6L. The expression on his face was priceless, and I knew then just what had happened.

Initial inspection of the gun revealed one main-landing-gear pin wedged quite firmly in the aircraft-interface adaptor. Another two pins were stuck in the rotor assembly, along with confetti of “REMOVE BEFORE FLIGHT” flags. The remaining seven pins and bag were unaccounted for, later to be found at the bottom of the gun bay. We had a FOD nightmare.

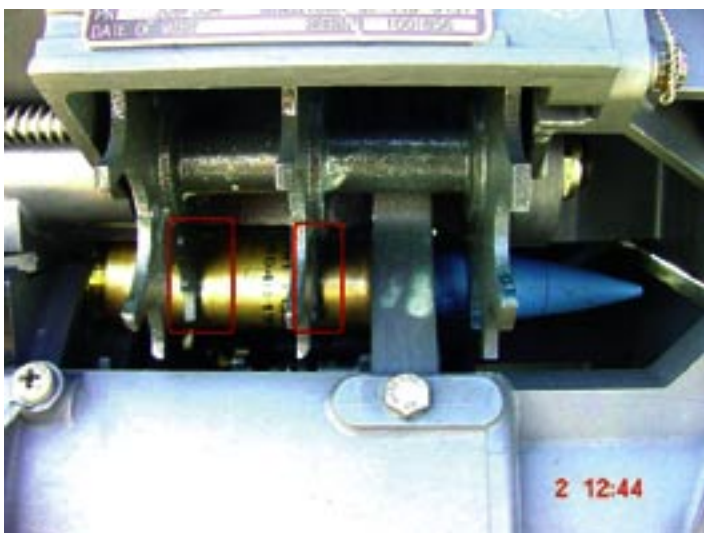
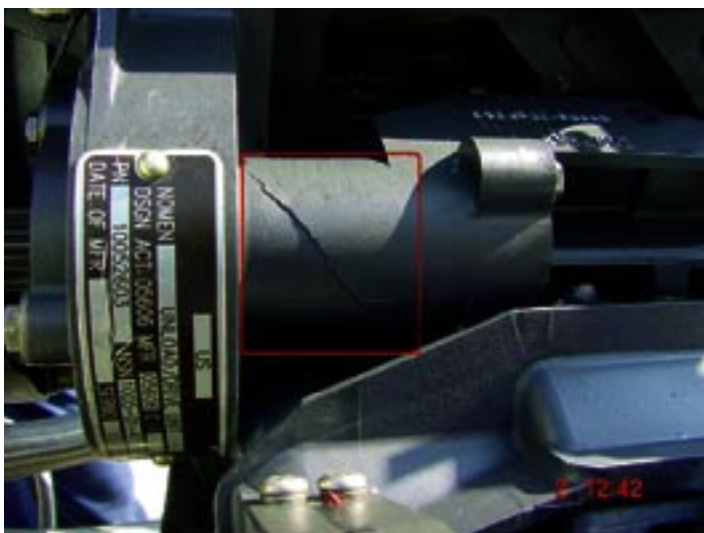
Mechs dropped, disassembled and inspected the guns for unsafe rounds. Though several fail-safes were in order (master arm safe, SIM boxed, weight-on-wheels), the discovery of a chambered round by Gunner during inspection left most of us a bit uneasy about the decision to taxi back to the CALA, swinging our nose in all directions.

Lessons learned that morning were numerous and led to a Hornet community-wide hazrep. First, even when everything is done right, things can go wrong. The plane captains that morning did everything by the book; there was no reason to change a procedure that had been successful for years.

Second, solid crew coordination is an invaluable asset. That morning, we used several sources to aid us in making all the right decisions, keeping a potentially bad situation from becoming worse.

The last learning point is not just for the students, but for everyone who steps across the foul line onto the ramp on a daily basis. In our business, questions come up frequently—ask away. Take the minor harassment in the ready room or shop with a grain of salt—it is all part of the job, the community, and the experience. It is far better to clear up what you may not understand while you are at one G, than to light the cans and take a question flying. You never know when the question you ask will end up wedged in the gear of a 20 mm Vulcan cannon, and if it does, you will be glad you asked first. 🦅

Ltjg. Nastro flies with VFA-137.



like a train wreck, then the sound of nothing.

I was confused coming off target as my IWSO threw questions at me.

“What happened? Did the gun just stop firing?”